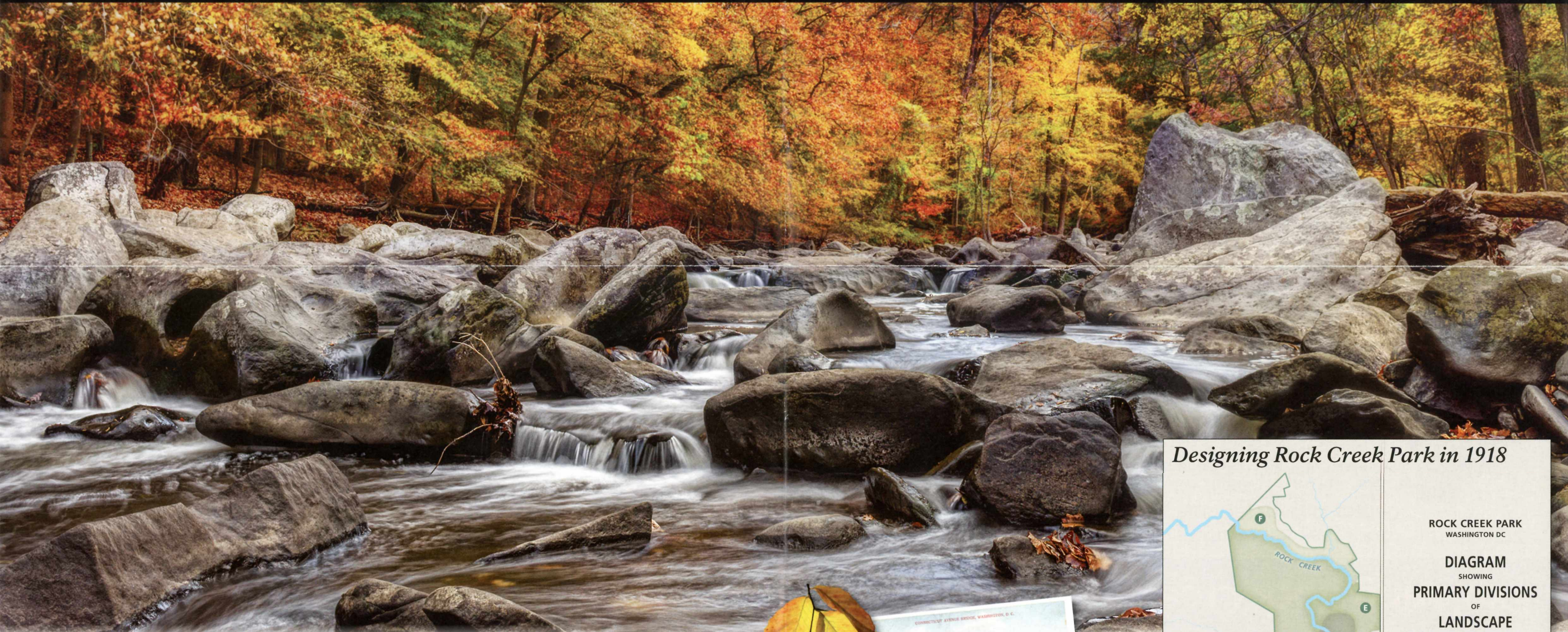




The Natural Heart of the Nation’s Capital

Washington, DC, bustles with visitors from around the world along with almost 700,000 residents. All are within a few miles of Rock Creek Park. Few know that this ribbon of forest, parkland, parkway, and trails is a national park. Set aside in 1890, it was the first urban national park.

Rock Creek Park was established to protect the natural and historic landscape of Rock Creek Valley and to be a “pleasure ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the

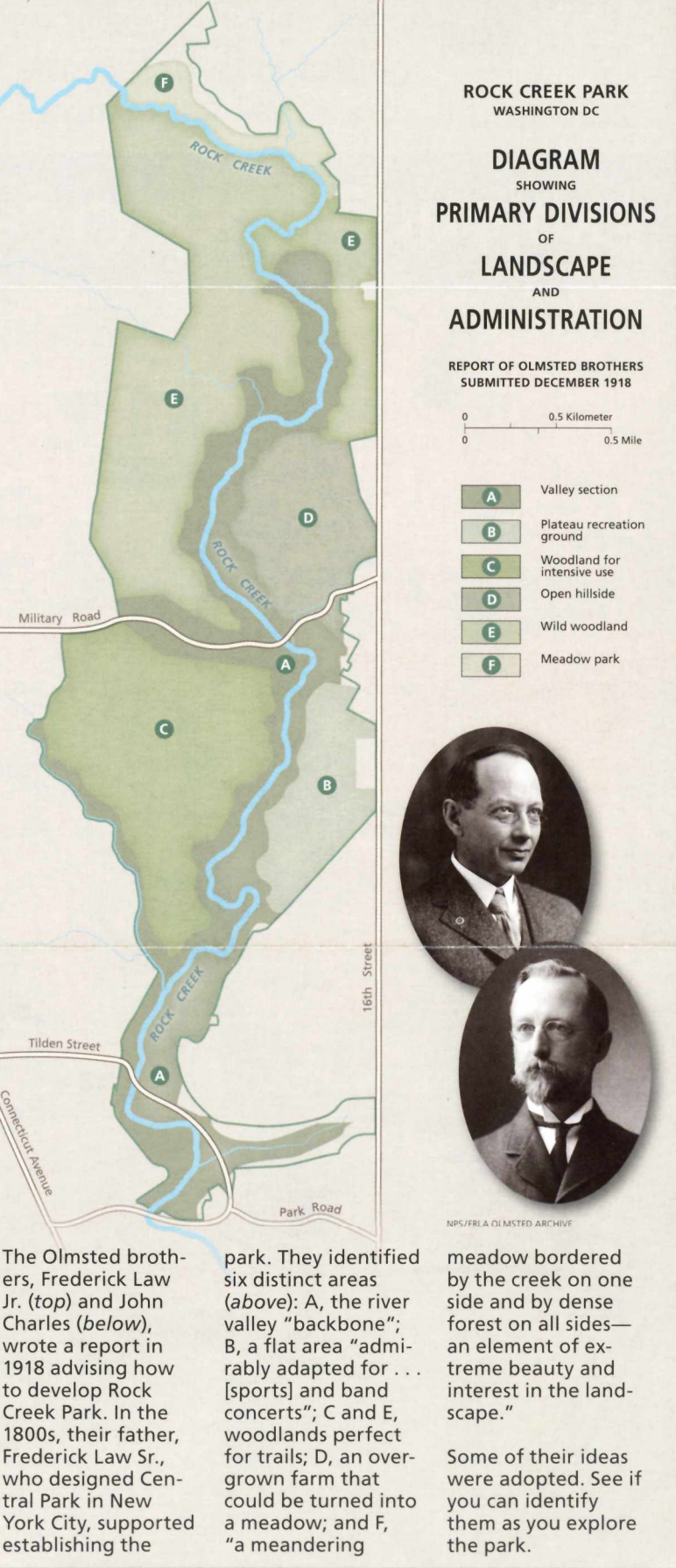
United States.” The park now includes other small valleys, urban parks, and historic sites. Together they showcase the many kinds of stories that national parks protect and honor. Here you can explore human history, conflict, and progress. See native plants and animals of the area. Engage in hiking, bicycling, and many other activities.

Welcome to the natural heart of this international city.



Clockwise from top: Rock Creek in autumn; American beech tree leaves; vintage postcard of Taft Bridge over Rock Creek; monarch butterfly; vintage postcard of Piney Branch Bridge; white oak leaves.

Designing Rock Creek Park in 1918



Exploring the Park’s Wild Side

One can hear the soft water sounds of a stream on its way to the river and sea.

Rachel Carson, scientist and author



One look at Rock Creek (top photo), and you can see how it got its name. Boulders of all sizes guide the water’s path and create rapids. Cross one of the park’s many bridges made of stone and wonder how these rocks were formed.

Most of the rocks are ancient granite formed by volcanic forces and aged through pressure and time. Erosion from the creek’s waters has slowly revealed the rocks and continues to shape them.

Rock Creek Valley lies at the boundary of two geologic provinces, the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain (left). You’ll find plants and animals from both provinces here, and from ecosystems like forests and floodplains.



Boulder Bridge in winter



Horses being led on a morning walk

As you walk or ride a horse along the trails, enjoy the variety of life here. Count the birds, insects, or frogs you hear. Watch for movement in the shadows. Spend time watching the water; you will likely see fish and aquatic insects.

Each season has its own surprises. Spring brings out the rare spotted salamander

Finding History Here

Herrings come up in such abundance into their brooks and fords that it is almost impossible to ride through without treading on them.

Robert Beverley, 1700s scientist

For more than 10,000 years, people have come to this valley for its fish and wildlife, plants, and rocks. Ancient hunters left piles of stone chips from making spears and other weapons and tools.



Herring; projectile points

As early as 4,000 years ago, people were growing food here. Until a few hundred years ago, Algonkian people came here to hunt and seek shelter from winter’s winds and storms.

Europeans arrived in the 1600s, drawn by the fresh water, fish, and wildlife. A city began to form during the 1700s. Visit the Old Stone House (above) to see how the colonial middle class and their slaves lived.

1700s



Old Stone House

1800s



Peirce Mill



Fort Stevens

1900s



Meridian Hill Park, a National Historic Landmark



Beatrix Farrand, Dumbarton Oaks, Virginia bluebells

2000s



Georgetown Waterfront Park

Keep the Wild Heart Beating

My heart found its home long ago in the beauty, mystery, order and disorder of the flowering earth.

Lady Bird Johnson, First Lady 1963–69

This wild heart of Washington, DC, has faced many challenges in the past few centuries, from being stripped of trees to being polluted by industry to being damaged by road construction. The National Park Service faces these and other problems with the help of its many hard-working partners and volunteers. Look for these and other examples.



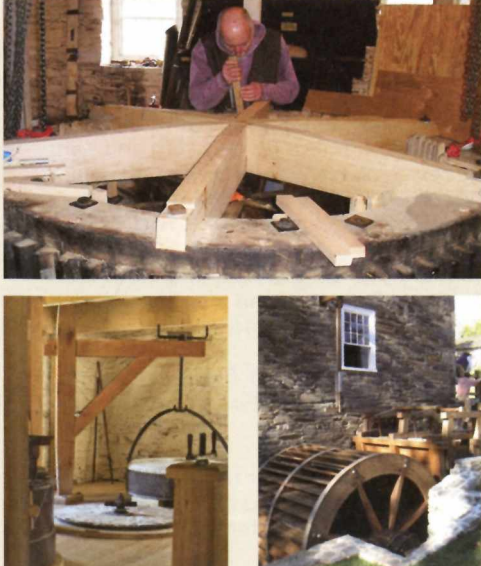
Herring Highway



Herring (below left) and other migrating fish were blocked from their spawning grounds by the dam at Peirce Mill (left). Now a fish ladder (to the right of the dam) allows fish to move upstream. Today you can see this and six other sites on the “herring highway.” Each site’s information panel explains a different aspect of the highway. If you come in the spring, you might see fish migrating.

ABOVE—NPS/TOM PARADIS, LEFT—BRUCE CHRISTOPHER, RIGHT—NPS/MARK MUSE

Restoring Peirce Mill



If you had visited Peirce Mill between 1993 and 2011, you would not have been able to see the mill in action. In 1993, the main shaft broke. A group of volunteers helped raise the money for experts to repair the mill. Volunteers and staff now offer programs and tours of the mill.

ABOVE—FRIENDS OF PEIRCE MILL, LEFT—WINDY MEDIA/COMODO/BOONACHOVEN, RIGHT—DR. JOHN BELL

Migrating Beauty



People flock to Rock Creek Park in spring and fall to look for migrating songbirds like these shown here. Some birders send lists of species they have seen to national databases where their information helps scientists track these migrants. Others volunteer in the park, helping to restore native plants that birds need for food, shelter, and nesting.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP—MATTHEW STUDEBAKER, CHEMANT KISHAN, CASEY TREES, FRANK KING, LLOYD SPITALNIK

